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SPIRITUAL LESSONS FROM THE BROWNING

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SPIRITUAL LESSONS FROM THE
BROWNINGS

SPIRITUAL LESSONS FROM THE BROWNING.

I. REVELATION BY LIFE.

A lesson from Robert Browning.

THE noblest and most inspiring religious teachers in all ages and lands have conveyed their messages through the medium of poetry. Theology always runs in a prosaic mould; ethics is very likely to take the form of apothegm; but the truth which inspires, which is the result of vision rather than of reasoning, usually finds poetic expression. The greatest of the prophets and the most persuasive of the preachers have all been poets; but all poets have not been preachers and prophets. The earliest manifestations of religious feeling are poems, like the hymns of the Vedas. The Hebrew prophets were all sublime poets. Sometimes their visions were voiced in the Hebrew parallelisms, and sometimes in prose-poems, but both vision and diction were always of the nature of poetry. It is possible to go a step farther and to say that most great poets have been profoundly religious. Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, the Brownings, and Whittier were all in the truest sense prophets. If any in these modern centuries have uttered the truth of God in enduring words, they have been such authors as these, no "idle singers of an empty day," but "minstrels who walked the earth with their singing robes

around them." They have been voices for the Spirit. The message of no prophet ever rang more truly to the music of love to God and man than do the songs of Whittier; no teacher has spoken more clearly of the immortal life and "the eternal hope" than Tennyson; the apostle John was not more intensely and nobly mystical than was Robert Browning; and no prophetess or Sibyl was ever more evidently filled with a divine passion than was Mrs. Browning.

In this little book I shall endeavor to emphasize two or three of the many spiritual lessons which the Brownings have taught the world. My object is not a study of these poets as religious teachers. That would require a volume of more imposing proportions, for one of them was a profoundly mystical theologian, and the other was an intensely practical preacher. My purpose is exposition rather than investigation.

Among the poems of Robert Browning is one which may be called an echo of the sermon on Mars Hill. "Cleon" is a supposed letter from a Greek poet, artist, and philosopher to his patron king. It begins with a recognition of the munificence and nobility of Protus, who had sent rich gifts to Cleon. Evidently in response to some inquiry of his king, Cleon recites his own achievements as a poet, painter, and architect; and this leads to the thought that he could not claim all the credit for his skill as an artist, but that it was the fruit of long ages of discipline and growth in others. Very quickly he comes to what the blind poet-preacher of Scotland, Dr. George Mathewson, has called the distinctive characteristic of all religions, viz., their teaching concerning incarnation. To this well-nigh universal faith Browning represents Cleon as giving expression in the following lines:

“ Long since I imaged, wrote the fiction out,
 That he [Zeus] or other God descended here,
 And, once for all, showed simultaneously
 What, in its nature, never can be shown
 Piecemeal, or in succession; showed, I say,
 The worth, both absolute and relative,
 Of all his children from the birth of time,
 His instruments for all appointed work.”

This passage, in which Browning represents a pagan as dimly anticipating the incarnation in Jesus Christ, has scriptural expression in the Gospel of John — “ And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Cleon imagined that God had descended to the earth. Men have always and everywhere desired a manifested God. That desire, in almost all lands, has sooner or later assumed the proportions of faith. The two great mystics, the apostle John and Robert Browning, are in entire harmony at this point. “ Only the good discerns the good,” says Mrs. Browning; and we paraphrase it and say, “ Only God discerns God.”

If God is to be known by us He must reveal Himself to us; when He does this there is that in all men which recognizes Him. There is never any difficulty in determining what things belong to God and what to man. The stars are God’s work; the frescoes in a cathedral are man’s work. Flowers are from the hands of God; imitations in wax and glass are made by man. Forests every autumn burn with the glory of God; houses are erected by man. In other words, we easily distinguish some things as human products and others as from a divine author. You find this idea of a Deity revealing himself in the poems of Homer and in the hymns of the Vedas. Browning’s pagan was not the only one who has dreamed that God descended. To this ex-

pectancy in humanity He comes, and is recognized as God. However much some may insist that Jesus Christ was only human, they never deny that His essential spiritual characteristics were those of the Deity. "No one by searching has found out God." We cannot find Him, but we may recognize Him. Is it reasonable to suppose that all men would be created with faculties for discerning the Divine, and never be given an opportunity for using them? Robert Browning teaches that the "desire of all nations" became reality in the Christian revelation in Jesus Christ — the supreme and only adequate disclosure of Deity in terms of human life.

But we are hardly more ignorant concerning Deity than concerning ourselves; and yet we can never know ourselves by studying ourselves. We may learn something of what we are at one period of time, but we cannot learn what we were intended to be. If you find a thousand pieces of china scattered by the roadside you have no conception of the beauty of a Royal Worcester vase. If you study those pieces separately you may discover that they are fragments of something artistic, but you must see the whole vase before you will have a vision of "the thing of beauty." Likewise if we would know what we are ideally, we must have before our eyes something besides our own poor experience, with our failures, mistakes, weaknesses, and often wilful wrong-doing. If we study ourselves we see fragments of manhood, or, at best, manhood unfinished; we do not see ourselves in our possibilities and ideal relations.

If a man ever knows himself he must be permitted to see — if we may so speak — the plan according to which he was made. And if we ever know God He must condescend to our limitations and within them reveal

Himself. If we ever know ourselves, our ideal selves must come to our actual selves in a form the reality of which cannot be doubted. Cleon seems to have grasped this fact. The God who, to his imagination, "descended" showed "simultaneously," that is, all at once, what could never have been understood if the truth had been given "piece-meal." The illustration of the vase will help us once more. If one piece of china and then another are examined the beauty of the whole design will never be appreciated. For that the perfect vase must be seen. And so one noble desire, another holy aspiration, another heroic act, will never make plain what we were really intended to be; the whole plan must needs be disclosed. And then we are related to beings above us and to other beings around us. The lines which connect us with persons and things above and around run away into darkness. Who shall tell whither they lead? We have never yet been able to reach far into the mysteries; they elude discovery; they are objects for revelation. Jesus Christ was a man, and yet a true Son of God. He was the typical man, what we were intended to be, and what we will be when time and discipline have done their work. He was also brother to all men: He entered fully and sympathetically into the human condition, and this shows that our true relation to our fellow-men is that of brothers. These simple truths could not be made plain in words: they required to be expressed in terms of life. Brotherhood even now is regarded, by many, as an iridescent dream; but no one fails to appreciate a warm-hearted, generous, self-denying brother. We speak of God; but our eyes have never seen Him, our ears have never heard Him, we cannot find Him, but He may come to us and make himself known. The "heathen" hoped that He would do this; the Chris-

tian says: "He has done it." Jesus Christ is the ideal man, and therefore all the revelation of God and of the perfected race that it is possible for our poor faculties to compass. This Robert Browning teaches.

Cleon dreamed of a God who would use men as instruments for all appointed work. That, also, is a thought which is of the substance of the Christian revelation. Jesus taught that all men were intended to be what He was. Behind this teaching there is a profound philosophy, since all that the world will know about Deity must come through man, or at least through something human. If God has a special speech of His own, in His intercourse with men He must lay it aside and use our language, because we cannot understand anything which is not human. Therefore men are the vehicles of all revelations to men. The Bible is the word of God in so far as that word could be written in a book, but only a small part of it could be thus written. Divine revelation has to submit to human limitations. Whatever is revealed of God, of the spiritual spheres, of the divine will, must be through the media of thought, words, deeds, or character, and these have no existence apart from human beings. Man is the organ; the wind is from above, and inspiration and revelation are the music which results when the divine breath fills the human faculties; but the human faculties are as essential as the divine breath.

Men are God's agents in all inspiration. By inspiration I mean not only the passion and vision of Isaiah, Paul, and John, but all that leads others to think great thoughts and undertake noble enterprises. General Gordon was inspired in his wonderful achievements in China; and when almost single-handed he withstood his murderers in the desert until his death at Khartoum. Abraham Lincoln and Alexander of Russia were divinely

guided to emancipate millions of slaves. Raphael, when he painted the "Madonna" and the "Transfiguration," was as truly inspired by the Almighty as John when he wrote the Apocalypse. All heroic endeavor shows traces of divine inspiration. Milton wrote "Paradise Lost," Coleridge his "Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni," Browning his "Cleon," Beethoven his sonatas, and Angelo and Murillo painted their angels and their saints, as they were moved by the spirit of God. When our Father would multiply pictures of the glory of nature and man He brings artists into being; when He would fill the world with music He pours into elect souls the echoes of heavenly harmonies; when He would thrill men with song He gives to poets the vision and the utterance divine. Cleon truly says, "Men are His instruments for all appointed work."

All divine purposes for men are achieved through men. When hoary evils are to be overthrown reformers are raised up like Luther and Knox. Whirlwinds never sweep away corrupt institutions, neither do they often fall of themselves, but a few men have clear sight and heroic courage, and these, seeing the evils which imperil the common weal, attack and destroy them. The prisons of Europe were made to approach decency through the efforts of John Howard—a man so full of holy love that it ran over in sacrificing service. Florence Nightingale revolutionized the war-hospitals of Europe and thus immensely diminished the horrors of war; and she was only God's servant.

Sometimes, probably, the Divine Spirit moves directly on human spirits, but, usually, if men are to be saved some man must take to them the Word of Life. Bloodless and impalpable propositions never helped the race one step upward. Salvation is by man. Instead of

12 *SPIRITUAL LESSONS FROM THE BROWNING'S.*

silent influences from the invisible, missionaries have taken the Gospel to their fellow-men, and not infrequently the truth would have been meaningless without the messenger.

Municipal abuses are corrected by no Pentecostal miracles. The wind may drive away the clouds and the sun burn up vapors, but it required Octavia Hill and John Ruskin to start the movement to secure better dwellings for the poor of London; and Arnold Toynbee and those who have come after him were needed to take the life of the universities to the slums of Whitechapel and the East Side of New York. The holy city may descend out of heaven from God, but its walls will be garnished by those who have learned their craft in the school of earthly experience.

As evils are to be reformed; as the Holy Gospel is to be preached; as better social conditions are to be created by men, so also comfort and peace are to reach the deepest individual needs through human agencies. The Apocalypse contains hints of a time when God will wipe away all tears, and bind up broken hearts. Did it ever occur to you that God's way of wiping away tears and binding up hearts that are broken is by human hands? or that the process has already begun? It is going on even now, not by the direct touch of the Almighty, but by means of the soft palms and loving influences of those whom we call brother and sister, father and mother, lover and friend. This also is worthy of emphasis. There will never be peace among the nations until there is peace among individuals; and there will be peace among men only as those who have vision and strength minister to those who have not. The better days are surely coming; evil will be overthrown; the Word of Life will reach into all lands; Hope in morning robes will drive

despair into the outer darkness; civilization and brotherhood will take the places of barbarism and selfishness; tears and sorrow will disappear, and all this will be achieved by the love in human hearts, the music in human voices, and the strength of human arms. But now the question, at once practical and personal, arises and presses for an answer: If God does His work through human beings, are we worthy to be used by Him? If He should desire our help in destroying evil, are our hearts pure enough, and our lives holy enough, for a service so transcendent? If He would have us speak of Christ to others, will they see Him in us? If words of comfort and peace are needed by those whose eyes are filled with tears, and whose hearts are breaking with sorrow, are we sympathetic and genuine enough for so holy a ministry?

These are some of the thoughts suggested as we study one brief passage from Robert Browning's "Cleon," and go back of the poem to the Scripture on which it is founded, and read of the Word made flesh, who dwelt on the earth, full of grace and truth. The "desire of all nations" is realized in God revealed not "piecemeal" or "in succession," but "simultaneously," in the perfect Man who is the type of all men and who has shown that all are God's "instruments for all appointed work."

II. THE SECRET OF SERVICE.

A Lesson from Mrs. Browning.

THE truths which I have traced in Robert Browning's "Cleon" find equally vivid though far different expression in the works of Mrs. Browning. The husband was speculative and philosophical; the wife was intense and practical. The husband wrote as one who

had a mystery to be solved; the wife as one who had discerned the only way in which a difficulty might be overcome; and both alike as those who had learned that the revelation of God in terms of humanity throws the only light on the human problem which is really luminous.

Leigh Hunt called Elizabeth Barrett Browning "Tennyson's sister." Some one else has called her "Shakespeare's daughter." She was, I think, the greatest poetess who has ever lived. It has been said that she had "a soul of fire in a body of pearl." No one was ever more sensitive to sorrow and pain. She was like a harp, and responded to the slightest breath of aspiration or of suffering. Her song was strong, clear, and sometimes terribly intense; again, it was soft and sweet as love itself. It was pervaded with trust in God and confidence in the triumph of His kingdom. Concerning her religious faith, Mrs. Browning wrote to Leigh Hunt, "I believe in the divinity of Christ in the intensest sense, that He was God absolutely. But for the rest, I am very unorthodox about the spirit, the flesh, and the devil."¹ Among her poems the longest is "Aurora Leigh," which is at once a novel, a social study, a poem, and a glorious hymn to pure love. It has been called by Taine the greatest long poem in the language — greater even than "Paradise Lost." Others have regarded it as crude, unfinished, extravagant. I think it is one of the few really great poems of our English literature, and that means of the world's literature. Aurora was the daughter of a Florentine mother and an English father. In her childhood she was brought, an orphan, to England, to live with an aunt who was critically formal and precise, and who little understood the impulsive girl who

¹ *Memoirs*, p. xxxv.

loved beauty, and into whose soul had already gone the tenderness of Italian skies and the sweetness of Italian flowers. In that home was a cousin who in due time loved Aurora, or dreamed that he did; but he was absorbed with social schemes and wanted a wife to help him in his work. The proud and splendid woman loved in return, but would have no such love as was offered to her. They separated — Romney Leigh oppressed by the weight of the world's misery, and thinking that Providence was dependent for its alleviation on him; Aurora to dream her dreams and sing her songs, and to wait for her vindication in the future. After ten years, chastened by many failures and deep sorrows, they once more told their love, and found that neither had ceased to long for the other. On this slender thread is strung wisdom, wondrous poetry, and truth profounder than philosophies often teach. Romney, speaking of his work for the out-cast, says :

“ But I, I sympathize with man, not God ;
 I think I was a man for chiefly this :
 And when I stand beside a dying bed,
 It's death to me. . . .
 And I, a man, as men are now, and not
 As men may be hereafter, feel with men
 In the agonizing present.”

Such identification with the sufferings of others is essential to good work for humanity. He who does not feel another's sorrows as if they were his own can never do much in the way of relief. But what motive is strong enough to inspire such identification with troubles not our own? This is the answer :

“ The hungry beggar boy . . .
 Contains, himself, both flowers and firmaments,
 And surging seas and aspectable stars,

And all that we would push him out of sight
 In order to see nearer. Let us pray
 God's grace to keep God's image in repute."

To see God's image in every man is to find inspiration for service that can never weary. Much effort at social amelioration is mere philanthropic dilettantism because persons are confused with things. Aurora held that the worst and weakest are children of God.

The necessity of the incarnation in order that men may be reached and inspired with heavenly aspirations condenses Mrs. Browning's philosophy and theology.

" 'T is impossible
 To get at men excepting through their souls,
 However open their carnivorous jaws; . . .
 The soul's the way. Not even Christ himself
 Can save man else than as He holds man's soul;
 And therefore did He come into our flesh,
 As some wise hunter creeping on his knees
 With a torch, into the blackness of some cave,
 To face and quell the beast there, — take the soul,
 And so possess the whole man, body and soul."

I now quote the very heart of the poem as a social study :

" 'The man most man, with tenderest human hands,
 Works best for men, — as God in Nazareth.' . . .
 He paused upon the word, and then resumed :
 ' Fewer programmes : we who have no prescience.
 Fewer systems : we who are held and do not hold.
 Less mapping out of masses, to be saved
 By nations, or by sexes. Fourier's void,
 And Comte is dwarfed, — and Cabet puerile.
 Subsists no law of life outside of life ;
 No perfect manners without Christian souls :
 The Christ himself had been no Lawgiver,
 Unless He had given the life, too, with the law.' "

These noble teachings concerning the methods by which the outcast and depraved are to be reached and uplifted are but an elaboration of the second chapter of Hebrews. "The man most man, with tenderest human hands, works best for men,—as God in Nazareth,"—is an echo of earlier words. Mrs. Browning's social philosophy is identical with the theology of the New Testament. It was necessary that the Saviour should be made like His brethren in order that He might show what humanity is destined to be. "God was in Christ;" and God in varying degrees is in all men. If we were what we might be, and may be in the long, long future, God would be in us, as He was in Jesus.

Jesus said: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father;" the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote: "It behooved Him in all things to be made like unto His brethren." In other words, it was God's duty to Himself to become man, for in no other way could He realize Himself. Man, not only one man, is designed to be the highest revelation of God. That means that Jesus Christ was the pattern of every "hungry beggar boy," every roué, and every tyrant with his foot on the divine image. Few of us have yet dreamed how far Christ's teaching goes; and, perhaps, still fewer are ready to receive doctrines so radical and revolutionary.

What were we designed to be? At this point Mrs. Browning is in agreement with her husband, only she expresses her views with more of intensity and passion. Jesus shows us in a human form what man must be when God possesses Him. God is love, and love manifests itself in service. He sees one blind, and can no more be prevented from opening those eyes than the sun from shining. He sees one burdened with guilt, and

can no more be kept from saying "Thy sins be forgiven thee" than the sun can be kept from burning up the mists. God is love, and when He has a large place in a man that man has a hand for ragged children, as Guthrie had; a head full of devices for the outcast poor, as Shaftesbury had; a consuming desire for the emancipation of the slaves, as Wilberforce had; a heart breaking for those in sin, as John Wesley had. In the most unselfish and loving spirits we see hints of what humanity will sometime be. Jesus differs from other men in that He is as full a revelation of the divine as is possible in humanity. Every human being, according to ability and opportunity, may be a medium for the manifestation of God. And more than this — God has always been in humanity. Precisely as this truth is recognized are individuals inspired to heroic and holy service. Who is that wretch wallowing in vice and drunkenness? Who is that child in an environment which makes virtue impossible? Who is that woman shivering, alone, swallowing her tears, asking: "Which is more to be dreaded, the cold waters, or the colder hearts of those who will not see what is crushing me?" Just as he is, that drunkard has something divine in him. In that dirty, boisterous boy is something which takes hold of Bethlehem, Calvary, and the throne of God, and which is capable of endless growth. That woman stained and soiled has been wronged, crushed by the ones who ought to have protected her; she is an outcast from the social order, but she is the sister of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Son of God. The Psalmist cried: "Whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: If I make my bed in hell, behold Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there

shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me."

Jesus goes a step farther. He teaches that the God who is on the horizon of the sea, and in the abysses of the under world, is also in the depths of humanity; that He is in all, white and black, good and bad, educated and ignorant, and that the cross is the only adequate hint of the worth of a man. This I hold to be a vital truth, and one greatly needing emphasis. There is a diamond "in every hungry beggar boy" and in every polluted wreck of manhood. Jesus in Himself is the revelation of what in some far-off time all may become; He is the altitude which the race will reach in the fulness of the ages.

"Alas, long-suffering and most patient God,
Thou need'st be surelier God to bear with us
Than even to have made us! Thou aspire, aspire
From henceforth for me! Thou who hast thyself
Endured this fleshhood, knowing how, as a soaked
And sucking vesture, it would drag us down
And choke us in the melancholy Deep,
Sustain me, that, with thee, I walk these waves
Resisting! breathe me upward, thou for me
Aspiring, who art the way, the truth, the life —
That no truth henceforth seem indifferent,
No way to truth laborious, and no life,
Not even this I live, intolerable."

No one who is great in power alone can get near enough to suffering human hearts to inspire them with aspirations for holiness. Why is a mother sympathetic? Because her child is part of her very self. She carries its griefs as her own, and has travelled the way along which her loved one is walking. Who are the most helpful in sorrow? Always those who have suffered. "My heart is breaking — who are you that you presume to advise me?" "But, my friend, I have been

where you are myself; last year I lost my fortune; six months ago I buried my wife; three months ago I laid my little one by her mother's side. I am all alone and poor, and I want to tell you that I have found these words divinely true: 'He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.' " Community in sorrow opens the door at once. "Come in, my brother. Show me the secret of your peace." Precisely because our elder Brother has been where we are, and knows all the way in which we move, He has attraction and inspiration for us.

Doubts, like clouds from the nether abyss, sweep into our horizon, and we cry, "If God is, I cannot find Him; if forgiveness is possible, I cannot realize it; if life is anything but mockery, I cannot understand it." In the midst of our perplexity two men come to us. One says: "You ought to put away those doubts. You are denying the Saviour who died for you." The other says: "Be patient, my brother, I have had experiences like yours. Do not do anything rash; wait to be led. I know there is no gloom more terrible than yours, for I have been in the same cloud; but by and by the light will dawn. Be sure of one thing — if there is a God, and you are really seeking Him, He will not allow you to fail of finding Him." Which of these will be the more likely to help us? If God is to command our wills, dispel our griefs, and save us from our sins He must show that He appreciates our difficulties. This the Christian revelation teaches that He has done: "He was made perfect through suffering." He was so hungry that He was tempted to turn stones into bread; so poor that He had no house in which to sleep; He lost friends by death; He was whipped until His back ran blood; He hung all day with nails driven through His quivering flesh; He was misunderstood, abused, lied about, and thus, having

been made "like unto His brethren," He was fitted to be not only their sympathizing friend, but their Saviour. "O Son of God, was ever grief like thine?" When the dark days come, as come they sometime will, you will realize how divine is the music which echoes among the ruins of your life, as you catch the accents of these sacred words, "He hath borne our griefs. . . . In all their afflictions He was afflicted." "But when I seek to be faithful to truth, as I see it, I am met by abuse and shame; it is enough to discourage any one." Yes, but death did not shake His loyalty to truth. "I try to help others, and for love hate is returned." Yes, and so it was with Him who prayed for those who drove the nails. "I am utterly crushed by disappointment and anxiety, and no one cares." Yes, some one cares. He who is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, He cares. I have been interested to observe that this truth of the sympathizing God appeals to men quite as much as to women. Perhaps it is because they have quite as much need of sympathy. A man's solitude sometimes seems more desolate than a woman's, possibly because he is less sensitive to the reality of the Unseen.

There is a God of all comfort because there has first been a long-suffering and compassionate God. The realization of this fact is the coronation of the human experience. Because she appreciated this so intensely Mrs. Browning was able to write, in "De Profundis,"

"And having in thy life-depth thrown
Being and suffering (which are one),
As a child drops his pebble small
Down some deep well, and hears it fall
Smiling, so I. Thy days go on."

This world is to be saved by life. "The man most man, with tenderest human hands, works best for men,

—as God in Nazareth.” And how did God work in Nazareth? By getting for Himself a lodgement in one perfect human heart and then living divinely within human limitations. “Fewer programmes,” “fewer systems.”

“ Subsists no law of life outside of life ;
 No perfect manners without Christian souls :
 The Christ Himself had been no Lawgiver,
 Unless He had given the life, too, with the law.”

For weary ages philosophers had tried to solve the problems of misery, sin, and death ; many plans for individual and social improvement had been devised, and as the result of the long process of speculation most thinkers had come to believe that the mysteries were insoluble ; that the best that any could do was to get through the world with as little trouble to themselves and as little annoyance to others as possible. Then Jesus Christ came with his new method of salvation by life. His plan was to impart His life to others. He selected a dozen workingmen, kept them with Him until they had something of His spirit and vision ; told them to do to others as He had done to them, and then closed His career by being put to death for loyalty to His great love. When compared with our ways of attempting large enterprises His plan seems stupendous absurdity ; but how magnificently it has worked ! One life touched other lives with its vitality and power ; brooded over them until they were ready to do the same to others ; they reached still others and imparted to them what they had received, and the process has gone on ever since. The history of Christianity is the history of the growth of the divine life into human lives and human society. An unknown Jew landed in Europe and began a movement which, quickly, was too big for Him to compass. He

preached to a few, but His words had wings. Many heard them and read them, and they in turn repeated the message, and sped it along until the map of the civilized world was changed. This is the miracle of miracles. An apparently unknown, uneducated Jewish peasant, who, after a short, ignominious career was executed as a criminal, has become the centre and inspiration of a movement which is filling the earth with light and love. The sun rose on the world when Jesus was born. Where He is followed mercy and justice walk hand in hand; where He is worshipped pure homes and gentle service make domestic life beautiful; where His words are heeded death loses its depressing and bewildering power. The Incarnation teaches that God's method of salvation is by life. We may try to trace the movements of life, but it is as independent of our theories as tropical vines are of trellises. We may think to shut it within some holy symbol, but it will break in pieces the symbol as a growing seed will split a rock. It is life that men need, the touch of living sympathy, the thrill of heavenly hope, inspiration to noble service, the vision of eternal possibilities, and this life always comes from above. We need not more sermons, but more men so genuine that lies will not stick to them. Not arguments for Christianity, but men in business and women in society pure as light, sympathetic as love, honest as truth, human as Christ, are the means by which this world is to be saved.

"It behooved Him in all things to be made like unto His brethren."

"The man most man, with tenderest human hands,
Works best for men, — as God in Nazareth."

Humanity has in it something divine; therefore no service for man is lost.

All who have sinned and all who have suffered may see in Jesus Christ what they were intended to be, and in Him they may see also the sympathy and sacrifice of God.

The divine method of saving the world is by the impartation of life, and the growth of the kingdom of God is the growth of that life into the hearts and lives of men.

Mrs. Browning's faith in the reality of the incarnation was the result of her intense sensitiveness to the sorrows of humanity. Her sympathy was the prophecy of the victory of the love and compassion which she discerned at the heart of the universe. To her practical mind the ideas of God and of the better time for the race were inseparably bound together. She could not even imagine a Deity who would not reveal Himself to His children crying in the darkness to know "wherefore they were born."

If this subject were always approached from the side of human need, rather than from that of speculation, there would be few who would not reach Mrs. Browning's conclusions.

III. HALF TRUTHS AND THE TRUTH.

A Lesson from Robert Browning.

I PROPOSE in this chapter to consider a subject which is suggested with about equal emphasis in Robert Browning's "Cleon" and in Paul's sermon on Mars Hill. Paul was in Athens. About him were the remnants of the most wonderful civilization the world had seen. He was surrounded by descendants of philosophers, poets, artists. In full view were the Acropolis and Parthenon. Socrates had walked those streets, and under whispering

trees near by Plato had led his disciples. In sight of the place where he stood may have been some of the creations of Phidias; and certainly those very walls had echoed with the impassioned appeals of Demosthenes and the polished periods of Pericles. Among such scenes Paul found an altar with the inscription: "To an unknown god," and by a reference to it began his address on Mars Hill.

There were several such altars in that city. Their origin is not known. "It is related that Epimenides put an end to a plague, and therefore one may find at Athens altars without the designation of a god by name. From this particular instance the general view may be derived that, on important occasions, when reference to a god known by name was wanting, as in public calamities of which no definite god could be assigned as the author, in order to honor or propitiate the god concerned by sacrifice, without lighting on a wrong one, altars were erected which were destined and designated 'To an unknown god.'"¹

The beginning of the sermon on Mars Hill was a recognition that there was an element of truth in paganism. Paul went directly to the reality beneath the inscription. The first part of the sermon is a proclamation of the God who was not discerned by the Athenians. The second part is a deduction from the first. If there is one God who made heaven and earth and all the races of men then all are related to Him, and should repent and seek His favor. This declaration he clinched by reference to one of the Greek poets, Aratos of Soli in Cilicia, in the third century before Christ, who said, "For we are His offspring." The same sentence is found in the hymn of Cleanthes to Jupiter. The Athen-

¹ Meyer's Commentary.

ians had glimpses of the truth concerning God and of the consequent unity and brotherhood of the race, but those glimpses were so dim as to exercise little influence on character. They were half truths, not the truth.

Robert Browning's "Cleon," a part of which has already furnished us an important lesson, also illustrates the subject at the head of this chapter. We have previously observed the emphasis which Browning placed upon the truth that if men ever realize their possible destiny it must be revealed to them in terms of life. In other words, God Himself must manifest His purpose in ways intelligible to human understanding. After the brief but vital passage which touches on incarnation as essential to revelation, we come to the heart of the poem. Cleon writes :

"Thou askest . . .
 Whether I fear death less than dost thyself,
 The fortunate of men? 'For' (writest thou)
 'Thou leavest much behind, while I leave naught.
 Thy life stays in the poems men shall sing,
 The pictures men shall study; while my life,
 Complete and whole now in its power and joy,
 Dies altogether with my brain and arm,
 Is lost indeed; since what survives myself?
 The brazen statue to o'erlook my grave,
 Set on the promontory which I named.
 And that — some supple courtier of my heir
 Shall use its robed and sceptred arm, perhaps,
 To fix the rope to, which best drags it down.
 I go then; triumph thou, who dost not go!'"

Thus we are introduced to the question of the ages, "If a man die, shall he live again?" That pagan king feared death. He thought when he died nothing of him would remain because he possessed nothing but temporal

power. He even envied the poet whose songs would be sung and pictures studied when his body should be dust.

“ In man there’s failure, only since he left
The lower and unconscious forms of life.
. . . We struggle, fain to enlarge
Our bounded physical recipiency,
Increase our power, supply fresh oil to life,
Repair the waste of age and sickness : no,
It skills not ! life’s inadequate to joy,
. agree,
O king ! with thy profound discouragement,
.
Most progress is most failure ; thou sayest well.”

This terrible sadness continues through a score or more of lines, and then nature begins to assert itself :

“ I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so overmuch,
Sleep in my urn. It is so horrible,
I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy,
To seek which, the joy hunger forces us :
. . . . But no !
Zeus has not revealed it ; and alas,
He must have done so were it possible ! ”

Little did Cleon dream that at that very time the life beyond death was being preached, and that there was even then in Greece one who had seen Him over whom death had no power.

“ . . . Farewell. And for the rest,
I cannot tell thy messenger aright
Where to deliver what he bears of thine
To one called Paulus : we have heard his fame ;

Indeed if Christus be not one with him —
 I know not, nor am troubled much to know,
 Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew
 As Paulus proves to be, one circumcised,
 Hath access to a secret shut from us ?
 Thou wrongest our philosophy, O king,
 In stooping to inquire of such an one,
 As if his answer could impose at all !
 He writeth, doth he? Well, and he may write.
 Oh, the Jew findeth scholars ! certain slaves
 Who touched on this same isle, preached him and Christ
 And (as I gathered from a bystander)
 Their doctrine could be held by no sane man."

Thus the poem ends. In it Robert Browning has given expression to the longing for religious certainty which was evident in the whole heathen world ; to the desire for knowledge about God ; to the feeling that, if He exists, He must in some way manifest Himself ; to the deep and constant hunger of the soul to know whether death ends all, and to the self-confidence which so often shuts the eyes to the light when the day really dawns.

The poem and the sermon on Mars Hill agree in recognizing that the Athenians had some truth. They were not in total darkness. They were in night, but the stars were shining. Those altars to an unknown god indicated a conviction of the reality of the invisible powers, and were symbols of the longing of the race for God.

Other altars have borne witness to the same fact. On Salisbury plains is Stonehenge, more marvellous than the Gothic splendor of the cathedral near by. In the centre of that solemn relic of ancient days is an altar. What does it signify ? That in some ruder time men believed in God and feared Him. Unknown He was, or to Him human beings would never have been sacrificed ; but the

hearts of men reached beyond their ignorance and said, "He must exist." Wherever men have begun to think they have cried: "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!" That cry indicates possession of a fraction of the truth about the Deity.

The sermon of Paul revolves around the hunger of the soul for God. The dominant thought of Robert Browning's poem is the equally persistent craving for knowledge concerning what follows death. Can life be "inadequate to joy," and there be no sphere in which joy is possible? Is it true that "most progress is most failure"? What terrible pathos lurks in the question, "If a man die, shall he live again?" When has it not been asked? Is there nothing for us but struggle, heart-ache, disappointment, a little gladness, and then a narrow space in the cold earth forever? Protus asked Cleon whether a poet feared death as much as a king; and the poet answered that he had reason to fear it more. The heart says, "I dare imagine some future state revealed to us;" but cold, hard fact simply says, "Zeus has not revealed it."

The subjects central in the sermon and the poem are the poles around which the history of the world has revolved.

The Athenians whom Paul addressed had a half truth; the poet who speaks through Browning's words had also part of a truth: his whole nature declared that life did not end at the grave, and yet, because he had no surer evidence, he heeded not the inner voice.

Half truths prove the truth. The crescent, as well as the moon at its full, shows that the moon exists. After a voyage of storm and fog the clouds lift and the hills of Ireland appear. Only a small part is seen, but the voyager could not be more confident that land has been

sighted if he saw the whole "green isle." When Columbus sought the new world his companions became discouraged and clamored for home. He kept them from turning back until drift-wood was seen on the waters: they were then as sure of the new continent as if they had seen it. Twenty miles at sea is a lighthouse. The line of rocks is out of sight, but the lighthouse sends its gleams far into the night; and in fog the sound of its bell never ceases. The mariner knows where he is and what to do because of the light and the bell.

The crescent is only a part of the moon; Ireland's coast-line is but a hint of Ireland; drift-wood is not much like the new world; and a lighthouse does not resemble a long line of concealed rocks: these are only parts of truths, but they prove that reality lies behind them.

The same principle holds in the moral and spiritual spheres.

As soon as men begin to think, they face the idea of God. It is imperfect — only a vast shadow; but where there is shadow there must be substance. Where did the thought of God first come from? When did it appear? There are indications that men have always had glimpses of a supreme power or person. The savage sees a spirit in the storm; in lightning, the flashing of an eye; and he hears a voice in reverberating thunder. Cicero said that what has been believed always and everywhere is the voice of the gods. A traveller catching sight of the spires of Cologne Cathedral knows that there is something great there, although he little dreams of the forests of pillars and statues which rise in sculptured splendor beneath. And we who everywhere see suggestions of love lifted above the wretchedness and ignorance of human life are sure that within the darkness is a Person.

The same reasoning applies to the idea of duty. The people never existed who did not believe that they ought to do right and ought not to do wrong; but the questions "What is right?" and "What is wrong?" have had widely different answers. The Hindoo mother thought it was right to throw her babe to the river-god; the Spartans thought it right to steal and wrong to be found out; the Druids offered human sacrifices. Is there, then, no right? Because ideals of duty differ, is truth a dream? The Hindoo mother had only half the truth: she was right in thinking she ought to obey the unseen powers, but wrong in what she believed was required by them. The Chinese are right in honoring their ancestors, but they have not yet caught sight of the truth that God is the Father of all. Men know that they ought to do right, therefore there is such a thing as right. A dozen soldiers hear an order to charge; they go ahead, each one doing what he is trained to do. Because they act differently, it does not follow that no order has been given. Men hear the voice of conscience saying, "Do right," and go in a thousand different directions; which only means that each is loyal to his own moral sense — as he ought to be. Different ideals of duty but emphasize the fact that beneath all of them is a unity in which they cohere.

And now we approach the subject of life beyond the grave. The doctrine in some form has always and everywhere been held. The Egyptians believed it; so did the Greeks, the Romans, the ancient dwellers in Mexico, and the American Indians.

Cleon said:

"I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us."

An inner voice declares that we were made for something better than death. That voice will not be silenced. We make our philosophies and talk about returning to the All, as do flowers, leaves, forests ; but the voice within says, "It cannot be." We hear the matchless music of Beethoven's symphonies and ask, "Will that music live and thrill for a thousand years, even though Beethoven has long since returned to dust?" Is the man less than his art? We look into the face of the Sistine Madonna and inquire, "Can we believe that that painting has won admiration for three centuries, while he who painted it has long since ceased to exist?" Was Raphael more ephemeral than the colors he mixed? This question contains one-half the truth concerning immortality. It is man crying, "I cannot die;" there is lacking only the response of the Divine voice, "Thou shalt never die."

It is impossible to think of an object unlike anything which ever existed. The mind never actually creates. Imaginations are but reflections of realities.

There have been in all ages and among all nations ideas of God, of duty, of life unhindered by death: where did they come from? These thoughts, however faint, prove that behind each half truth is a corresponding truth.

"Our little systems have their day,
They have their day, and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they."

Half truths and no more leave us in darkness. The Athenian idea of an unknown God left room for the doctrine of many gods. In all the streams were nymphs, in all the trees were dryads; there was a god for the sea, another for war, another for love; highest of all was Zeus, and all the deities were at last subject

to the fates, so that it is difficult to say what the Greek theology really was. The faith was full of poetry; it glorified nature; it did not lack reverence, but it lacked conscience. Its votaries lived among glorious hills, beside swift rivers, near the "far-resounding sea," beneath tender skies, and in a climate that wooed to constant dreams. There was in their religion no clear idea of an Almighty who ruled in justice, and would surely cause holiness to prevail. They thought of themselves as possible friends, or enemies, of a thousand divinities. They had a hint of the fact that they were the offspring of God, but there they halted and the result was sensualism.

Turn now to Browning's poem. Cleon felt within himself the thrills of immortal life. When his soul had a chance to assert itself, it cried, "I must live, and continue to sing, and paint, and build, and make glad the hearts of men;" but then the darkness closed, and, from the dream-tower that he had climbed, he cried:

". . . But alas!
The soul now climbs it just to perish there.
. . . I . . . agree,
O king, with thy profound discouragement,
Who seest the wider but to sigh the more,
Most progress is most failure; thou sayest well."

We are made to live, yet are condemned to die: this was the conclusion of those who had no clear revelation of God, and no light on the future, except the longing of their own hearts.

In a sense it is true that those who have only half truth are no better than those who have none. And yet we must discriminate, for no one has more than a partial view of anything. It is not the fractional view which

does the harm, but mistaking that half for the whole. The spirit of man is always more than what he possesses. Many of the most heroic souls have had limited knowledge. Men of action require intensity rather than largeness of vision. The question of how we use what light we have is more important than the amount which has dawned upon us.

Those who hold a part of a truth firmly, except in rare cases, make up for lack of vision by positiveness of conviction. The bigots of all ages have been those who were true to what they saw, and yet who saw but little. They have had glimpses of justice and none of love, or of love and not of justice. They are usually good, but seldom do good. Enthusiasts have wide visions, and are filled with great inspirations, but fanatics and bigots usually compensate for lack of knowledge by dogmatic assertion. The larger the view of God and the universe the finer and sweeter the life, and the nobler and more inspiring the influence.

Most men hold to half truths instead of the truth because they are not willing to learn. Protus had heard of Paul and Christ, and had asked his learned friend concerning them. The king, realizing that he had nothing but power, was willing to turn to any one who could give him knowledge. The poet and philosopher disclaimed to receive light from the only source from which it could come :

“ Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew,
As Paulus proves to be, one circumcised,
Hath access to a secret shut from us ? ”

New truth comes only to the open mind. I would rather be a heathen with mind and heart open than a Christian with the windows of my soul closed. Paul preached in Athens the doctrine of the eternal Father-

hood, of resurrection and life, and some mocked, and others said, "We will hear you again." Cleon heard a divine voice in his soul declaring that he ought not to die, but he would not heed the message because it came from a "barbarian Jew."

There is a light which lighteth every man which cometh into the world. Plato, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and thousands of others have walked by that light. Those who have truly sought have found what they most needed to know. Something in every soul speaks of God, duty, and immortality. In all lands and times many have been true to the primal revelation. The condition of knowledge is willingness to learn. The last word has not been spoken concerning any great subject. Truth does not change, but human apprehension and expression of it ought daily to be adjusted to the new conditions. We should say to all men, to all books, to all nature, "If you can tell me anything of God, of myself, of duty, or of the hereafter, bring me your message!" If the Athenians had done this they would not have scorned Paul. If Cleon had done this he might have found peace at the hands even of a "barbarian Jew." If the church of Rome had done this she would never have put her hand on Galileo, or sent Giordano Bruno to the stake. If we, in our time, would do this we should say to all heroic and consecrated investigators in all fields of inquiry: "We have no theories to exploit; we desire only truth, let it come whence it will."

I am persuaded that we are on the eve of a day of great spiritual disclosures. The unknown is constantly opening its depths. The miraculous is becoming natural. No one would be surprised if the elixir of life were to be found and death forever banished. What next? We stand before the tremulous curtain which separates from

the unseen universe, and would not greatly wonder if it should rise and reveal visions of which, as yet, we have not dreamed. Never was there more need of the open heart and submissive will than now.

If Paul were to return to the earth he would see that his doctrine of God has turned the kingdoms of the world upside down. It is not France of which Germany is afraid, but the doctrine of Paul on Mars Hill. It was not the mob that overthrew the Empire in France, but the doctrine of Paul on Mars Hill. If Cleon were to return, would he call Paul "a barbarian Jew"? and say of Jesus, "His doctrine could be held by no sane man"? He who is willing to learn finds truth. He who shuts his mind, whether he be orthodox Christian or heathen philosopher, is sure to shut the light out, and with it the freedom and peace which come with truth.

What is truth? Pilate's sneer has long been the world's inquiry. The answer of the Christian's Master is, "I am the truth." So far as He is yet understood, have the life, teaching, and influence of the Christ justified His claims? Is He the truth? There is only one test. Does He satisfy the needs of the human soul? Does the deep within respond to the deep without?

Is Jesus Christ the truth concerning God? Can there be a more satisfying conception of Deity than this? — In infinity and eternity He is revealed in Jesus Christ, who was full of love, tender as a mother, sympathizing with the needy and outcast, a being whose essential nature impels Him to bind up the broken-hearted, heal diseases, forgive sins, and cause all things to work toward blessing. The transcendent and immanent Deity of the theologians, the absolute and unconditioned of the philosophers, in all that concerns His relations to His crea-

tures is manifested in Jesus Christ. This is the first principle of the Christian revelation.

Is Jesus Christ the truth concerning duty? He said: Love God with all thy heart, and love one another as I have loved you. He said, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Is there one sin or vice, one social or moral disorder which would not be banished from the earth if His rule of love were to be obeyed? Has any philosophy of ethics ever gone deeper than this sentence of the Apostle, "Love is the fulfilling of the law"?

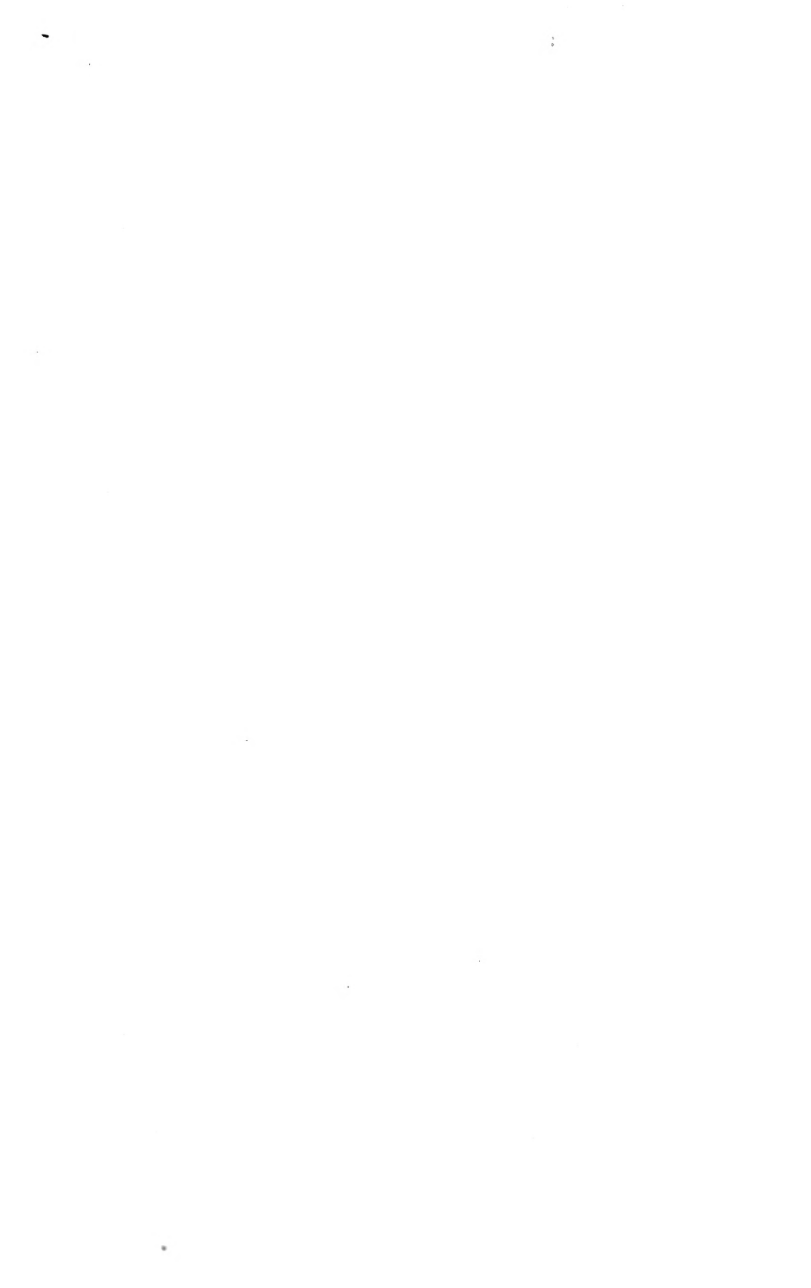
Is Jesus Christ the truth concerning what lies beyond the grave? He was buried; death did not hold Him; He arose in a form which human eyes recognized, and held communion with his old companions. In all things He was the type of humanity, He was the perfect Man; and therefore, as in His life and death He reveals God descending to man, so also in His resurrection He shows man rising to communion with other spirits in the land where there is no death.

Did Jesus Christ reveal all that will ever be known of God? This we cannot believe. With the advance of science and the enlargement of experience, new ideals of right and wrong will be uplifted. The standards will rise as life expands. "And He has not told us very much about the future!" No, but He has furnished the light we need to live by, and our true course is to keep close to Him, waiting for further revelations.

Do you say, "You have painted a beautiful picture, one that would satisfy if it were only true"? That is the very point of my argument. Because the Christian revelation does satisfy, because it answers the eager and irrepressible voices of the soul, because it meets the universal human longing with all that any need to know

of God, duty, destiny, I insist that it is worthy to be trusted. There is no other court of appeal; if this does not certify truth then the race must remain forever in darkness.

The address of Paul and the poem of Browning emphasize great thoughts: Half truths prove the truth, as the shadow the substance. Those who are content with half truths might almost as well be in total darkness. He who would know much of spiritual things must keep his mind open. In our search for reality we are not left to ourselves, we have the truth embodied in a Person, and the race will always have the Spirit of Truth, who forever and forever will lead into all truth. We move on toward the future with music in our hearts and a song on our lips, because we believe in our Father, God, our Saviour, Christ, and in an immortality of constant growth and ceaseless joy.



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